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Approaches to Historical Explanations

Esther Eidinow

Ann Taves' *Revelatory Events* is a fascinating book. It draws its reader into the earliest days of three different spiritual organizations (their identification as such is carefully drawn), methodically unpacking the processes of their emergence. Very clearly written and structured, it moves between disciplinary discourses, sifting meaning from the multiple narratives relating to each case study, and their myriad, often conflicting details. In particular, Taves' examination of these accretions of accounts, and her insights into the ways in which these stories shifted over time and changing contexts, are particularly absorbing. The result is a rich and very stimulating volume. Taves states in the preface (p. xiii) that there are three different ways of reading the book: first, as a contribution to the study of new social movements; second, as a contribution to creativity studies; and third, as a demonstration of how historians can use cognitive social sciences to explain historical phenomena. ("Cognitive social sciences" is unpacked later to mean a combination of social scientific theories about creativity with experimental research on nonconscious mental processes grounded in evolutionary and cognitive social psychology; see p. 224.) The book aims to explain the nature of revelation specifically as an event, and this reader certainly came away with clearer insights into both the experimental research into individual abilities which may explain such phenomena, and aspects of the historical contexts in which they may have occurred. And, from its earliest pages, this account provoked useful and invigorating questions for me, and I am grateful for the opportunity to explore them a little further here.

I start with a brief response to the book's initial discussion of the definition of revelation and its knowledge claims. This aspect introduces not only a number of specific issues that I will discuss further below, including the analysis of the subjective experience of historical actors, and the nature of historical explanation, but also an overriding theme of concern that runs throughout my comments here: the need for – and difficulties of introducing – contextual complexity.

Taves states early on (p. 2) that there are two knowledge claims involved in a "revelatory event." The first of these is "the commonplace and empirically verifiable

claim that knowledge has been communicated or disclosed,” and it is the second, the claim that it comes “from a divine, supernatural, or suprahuman source,” which is “controversial.” At first sight, this neat division seems intuitively right, but (for me) reflection on examples of ancient revelatory events prompts some uncertainty. For example, the accounts of healings (*iamata*) given in dreams at Epidauros, in the Sanctuary of Asclepius, are difficult to fit into this structure (for translations of the texts, see LiDonnici, 1995). How are we to understand the claim that such knowledge had been communicated as either commonplace or empirically verifiable, except in the most trivial sense? For the Greeks, the idea that a god might visit in a dream, and impart the means of your physical or mental restitution, was perhaps less unusual than in (at least) most modern Western cultures; but the fact that accounts of such visits were posted on *stelai* (pillars) around the temple implies that this was not regarded as a “commonplace” claim. The display of the *iamata*, as well as the fact that these accounts include stories about those who visited and doubted the god’s power, also intimates that, even for those involved, verifiability was an issue. In turn, the division between the claim that knowledge had been communicated (knowledge that often involved guidance about what behavior was acceptable to the gods) and the origin of that knowledge is unclear: the (often remarkable) content of these revelations can be read as offering at least some evidence that the interaction in which it was transmitted must have been with a supernatural figure. Thus, the clarity of Taves’ initial definition, while admirable, seems to me to risk eliding the necessary complexity of this phenomenon. Indeed, when we turn back to the case studies in this book, her own careful examination of the content of the different revelatory claims indicates that her analytical approach is more complex than this initial definition suggests. These case studies seem to demonstrate that the claims made about the communication of the knowledge are as significant as – and integrally related to – those about its source.

Examining the definition of revelation leads directly to another example where complexity is necessary: the subjective experience of historical actors. As part of the discussion of her own values and presuppositions (pp. 9–10), Taves argues that “it’s important to take account of how things feel to people on the inside,” and asserts that it is important to be able to shift between humanistic and scientific assumptions, so that we can “explore what experiences, beliefs and practices are like for those who

hold them.” This is something of an impossible ambition for most ancient historical studies. For example, the individuals whose experiences are recorded in the *Iamata* are otherwise unknown; they left nothing behind but a name and an inscription; they may never have existed; and yet they appear to offer attestation of a certain body of beliefs. (And I use the term “belief” loosely, in light of the current debate in my field about its historical significance.) Nevertheless, while there are many who would disagree that we can ever access the realm of experience or belief of our historical subjects, I would rather argue that an individual cannot be extracted from their surrounding culture – with all that implies both for an individual’s cognitive processes and the evidence produced by or about them. In the process of being spoken or written, even a first-person narrative is, of course, a product of some reflective practice on the part of the author, shaped by existing cultural frames, and in response to assumed audiences and implicit or explicit expectations.

This may provide ancient historians with something to say about experience; it has different implications I think for Taves’ project. The evidence that she brings to bear largely comprises written testimony; her description of her method is relatively brief. Specifically (p. 304), in explaining how to access a subject’s initial appraisals, she describes a process of comparing texts and looking for a comparison of subevents: if the descriptions of what happened change over time, then this should prompt analysis in relation to the context in which that narrative was told; if they remain stable, they are more likely to be “closely connected to the initial unconscious appraisal of the event.” This is a thoughtful approach, necessitating gratifyingly close attention to the details of the texts, and usefully reminding us of the ways in which contexts shape narratives. Nevertheless, it raises questions, seeming, perhaps inadvertently, to suggest that an initial unconscious appraisal can occur in the absence of social learning. Those factors that remain stable across testimonies surely require as much explication as those that change between versions: to begin to develop an understanding of events, we need to set the historical actors in context; to begin to grasp their motivations, we need to begin to assemble their worldview, situated within their social relations, and constrained by institutions and social structures.

The phenomena of revelation (or any historical event) take place within a nexus of (causal) social factors; this is not to leave behind individual mental processes,

but rather to consider how they interact with, shape, and are shaped by social context. To illustrate what I mean, first, take the question of the negotiation of Joseph Smith's authority. Taves provides a wonderfully detailed analysis of the various relevant narratives, and the ways in which these may indicate the changing appraisals of individual and group. A key element in the formation of those narratives, however, was the broader cultural context in which they were produced, which will have influenced both the interactions around this practice (e.g., Smith's being taken to court in 1826) and the actors' motivations (e.g., Smith's careful protection of his own authority vs. those who also claimed to have gifts of seership and prophecy). In order to better evaluate Smith's mentality, motivation, and activities – and those of the people who responded to him – we require some understanding of the world of seers that he inhabited, and the nature and extent of the associated beliefs in the region. Taves does give some glimpses of the larger society, which whet the appetite, but I would have welcomed a fuller examination of the complexity of both beliefs and social relations in which Smith was operating (e.g., Sally Chase, mentioned on p. 41 as another local seer, enlisted by a “mob” to find the gold plates, was also a very successful treasure seeker, and sister to Willard Chase, on whose ground Smith's stone was found, and who fought for ownership and return of the stone; see Bushman, 1984, p. 70).

Broader contextual material of this kind enriches our understanding of the actors and their motivations; it may also further problematize a historical analysis. For example, it is not surprising that the most detailed psychological insights into the key individuals in these case studies occur with reference to the most recent, Helen Schucman. They include reports of her “neurotic side... anger, skepticism, and inability to change” (p. 173), and her unrequited and obsessive feelings for William Thetford. I was particularly taken by the inclusion of this detail, especially in comparison to the other key figures about whom such evaluative and emotional personal information was not given. In Part 2 of the book (p. 284), Taves considers how Schucman's desire for Thetford may have shaped the final goals of the Voice, and includes an analysis of her need for love. The overall impression is of Schucman as powerless in the face of her feelings, the object of those feelings, and even of the Voice itself. I wondered how this impression might be changed if these factors had

been introduced in Part 1's descriptive analysis of the processes that generated Schucman's early visions, for example if we asked to what extent Schucman's desire to engage Thetford and keep him interested influenced her accounts to him of her earliest visualizations; or whether/how the emergence of the Voice provided Schucman with a source of authority that challenged the power of her obsession with Thetford. Could this information have been deployed to explore Schucman's motivations and her agency? Paradoxically, the very factor that appears to deepen our understanding of her motivation may also, in some ways, be taken to undermine her authority. Although in the end this is noted as being irrelevant, it is only in the case of Schucman that Taves suggests that insight into her personal motives could have raised the possibility that they were "questionable" (p. 284); in contrast, the idea that, for example, Joseph Smith may have been looking for economic gain is not discussed in the same way. Perhaps particularly, but not only, with regard to Helen Schucman, the question of the role of the cultural framings of gender and its interplay with attributions of authority seems very relevant to these case studies, and some discussion of this aspect would have added an additional dimension to this rich analysis. (Most surprising, perhaps, is its absence in the comparison of Smith and Schucman and their respective experiences and processes of translating their materials; pp. 241–269.)

While we may distil an explanation that provides some key elements of the phenomenon we wish to explore, in situ, the manifestations of that phenomenon and/or relations between concepts are inevitably more nuanced, revealing a complexity that it is necessary to investigate if we are to acquire deeper understanding. To gather a full picture of the emergence and social formation of organizations such as those under study here requires us to understand or situate the leading individual in both their personal and their historical context. Information of this kind is not simply descriptive analysis, it is a mode of explanation. It furthers our comprehension of the individuals being studied. For example, in Part 2, the question of the remarkable nature of these individuals is raised, but just how remarkable and in what ways can really only be established by a fuller examination of the context in which they developed. This would also help to unravel the group processes of co-creation that were involved in the emergence of a supernatural presence. It may be more useful in

analyzing the spread of “belief” than invoking, as here, Durkheim’s theory of the totem (pp. 292–295), to explain the ways in which the surrounding group relates to either the particular instantiation of the supernatural in each case or to the figure channeling it. Durkheim’s theory was and remains controversial: used here, it subsumes the complicated, individual relationships to which the evidence itself attests. (I did ask myself if the identification of the supernatural figure as the totem was what was misleading here.) Similarly, the dichotomy of believer and skeptic (in-group and out-group) that occurs in some of these case studies could also be usefully nuanced. For example, in the first case study, it seems too neat to argue that the witnesses simply saw as Joseph Smith did, and are therefore evidence for “the power of the human mind to see things together in faith” (p. 65). The comparison made a few pages earlier in the book, between Smith’s approach to the gold tablets and a Catholic’s approach to transubstantiation, is rather to the point: even within that dogmatic institution, there is evidence of the variability of beliefs in those going to Mass (Hornsby-Smith, 1991). It may be that Joseph Smith regarded his work in this way, but with regard to the beliefs of his followers, like those who go to Mass, it seems misleading to assert that they “saw things together.”

These reflections lead to some more general observations about the nature of explanation, particularly prompted by Taves’ comments on the relationship of history to other disciplines, which she addresses on p. 3 of the introduction and which also structures the volume as a whole. The first part of the book, as she notes, is written as a “historian.” This appears to mean “analyzing the events people consider revelatory without attempting to explain them”; the second part of the book, as Taves describes it, draws on a broader range of disciplines to create an explanation of the emergence of these new spiritual paths in naturalistic terms. I am intrigued by the way this division is characterized, since it appears to imply that history is a methodologically unitary discipline that does not bring us into the “explanatory fray” in a way that is achieved by the sciences. The idea that historians do not set out to explain phenomena is puzzling (the fifth-century BCE writer Thucydides provides perhaps one of the earliest examples of a writer of history who explicitly invokes this as his motivation). There are, of course, different philosophies of historical explanation (and it might be possible to reframe the book’s two parts in these terms, Part 2 illustrative of an

Anglo-American analytic tradition – the focus on mental processes offers an intriguing twist to questions of causality – while the analysis of narrative in the book's Part 1 engages more with a continental hermeneutic tradition). Moreover, historians have drawn on a broad range of other disciplines, albeit not without scholarly debate (e.g., Scott, 2012). It does not seem to be necessary to turn (as Taves) to a naturalistic explanation in order to acquire an “economical explanation that presupposes that what things feel like subjectively isn't necessarily the best way to explain them scientifically.”

But, more importantly, this seems to beg the question of what comprises a scientific explanation, and what is meant by (or is so desirable about) being “economical.” As I have tried to suggest in this brief commentary, while more rigorous models for establishing the mental processes of individuals and the appraisal processes of small groups can provide a fascinating perspective on historical events and the experiences of historical actors, without the social context they can offer only a partial explanation of these phenomena.

Taves has delineated some of the ways in which different explanatory approaches can run alongside

one another. Her approach is pioneering: attempts to introduce theories from the hard sciences into humanities have met with substantial challenges. Here we find the mental processes of the individual clearly and helpfully explained, and a model for how their study can provide further historical insights.

But the question of how to integrate these insights, exploring how individual relates to group, and then to wider society (as a social movement spreads), remains for me less clear. As Hedström and Swedberg

(1998, p. 13) put it, in their discussion of social science mechanisms (conceptually similar to that of

Taves, but emphasizing the inter-relationality of individuals): “The action being analyzed is always action by individuals that is oriented to the behavior of others.”

They propose using a number of mechanisms at different levels of social focus and process: first, situational, then action-formation mechanisms and then a transformational mechanism. I wonder how this could come together with the mechanism described by Taves, and what level of analytical complexity that

combination could achieve. Whether this particular method was employed or not, such a study that combined the naturalistic study of individuals with a fuller analysis of social context would be very demanding, and no doubt require that the writer focus on just one case study. I have to say, I really hope that Ann Taves will write this for us.

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